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TESTIMONY OF REPRESENTATIVE ELISSA WRIGHT
STATE REPRESENTATIVE, 41ST DISTRICT

S.B. 314 (RAISED), AN ACT CONCERNING THE HERITAGE PARKS ADVISORY BOARDS.

Environment Committee Public Hearing – March 7, 2014

Senator Myer, Representative Gentile, members of the Environment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of *S.B. 314, An Act Concerning the Heritage Parks Advisory Boards*.

The framework for a system of state heritage parks began in 1987 with the enactment of Public Act 87-340, *An Act Creating a Statewide Heritage Park System*. The heritage park concept, now codified at sections 23-10h and 23-10i of the general statutes, envisions a nontraditional form of state park, expanding on traditional park elements to coordinate the historical and cultural sites in a city or region in a cohesive way, e.g. through visitor services, educational programming, marketing, signage, and other infrastructure, in order to create a more comprehensive picture of the historic significance and cultural assets linked by a common social, historical, or economic theme.

Although envisioned nearly 50 years ago, to date the state has not exploited the opportunities to create heritage parks or maximize their untapped potential to promote tourism, grow the local economy, and give residents and visitors a deeper understanding of the people, places, and traditions that have shaped a region.

Under current statute, prior to designating the boundaries of any heritage park, the Commissioner of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) must establish a board to advise him or her on the boundary, name, theme, and sites to be included in the potential park. Each municipality located in the park area is entitled to representation on the board and the commissioner designates members from lists provided by the legislative bodies of each municipality.

In today's world, this bill's more flexible approach to establishing the organizing framework or management entity for state heritage parks could help advance their designation and development while ensuring public involvement and a commitment to the proposal from appropriate players, which may include state government, municipalities, industry, private and nonprofit organizations, in addition to local citizens.

By streamlining the process and eliminating the layer of an advisory board under statutory language created decades ago, Raised S.B. 314 would facilitate the assemblage of sometimes noncontiguous historic and cultural resources that are worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use through their inclusion within a heritage park “without boundaries” -- and in so doing invigorate tourism, support historic preservation, and promote local businesses, economic and community development.

Over the past year or so, a number of individuals, including Senator Andrew Maynard, Representative Edward Moukawsher, myself, and other area legislators, have worked with state and local officials, local nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders to rejuvenate and bring to life the Thames Maritime Heritage Park as a heritage-based recreational and educational attraction encompassing affiliated historical sites that straddle the estuary of the Thames River at Long Island Sound and are located in city of New London and town and city of Groton.

In the 1990s when the Thames Maritime Heritage Park originally was planned, it was one of six sites proposed within a Connecticut heritage park system and was intended to serve as a model for future parks. At that time, several major milestones for the park were completed, including a \$2.6 million state bond allocation to DEEP in October of 1990 for design and construction costs associated with the proposed park. A portion of that funding was used to construct a boat dock on the Groton bank side of the Thames River intended to provide the capability to link attractions in Groton and New London by water taxi.

The Thames Maritime Heritage Park did not, however, materialize. Plans for a visitor center eventually fell through and the focus of attention changed when the Navy donated Fort Trumbull to the state and the fort was turned into Fort Trumbull State Park.

Recently, building on the 1994 implementation study and master plan for the Thames Maritime Heritage Park, members of the Yale Urban Design Workshop as consultants to the Avery-Copp House Museum in the city of Groton, have served as catalyst for engaging a number of potential participating partners within state and local government, key interest groups, and affiliates in the nonprofit sector to reexamine the issues and provide a foundation for moving forward with planning and creation of a heritage park for the Thames estuary area.

Technology has outpaced the necessity for major infrastructure investment in a physical visitor’s center. In this era of self-guided tour apps, most visitors to the area could find their way around the park, and, if they wish, use their cell phone app to dial up information on each site within the park without the need for a visitor’s center.

Leveraging the work of the past, the modifications to General Statutes Sec. 23-10i in this bill would facilitate the planning, selection, development, and marketing of state heritage park sites and help realize long-held goals of the original heritage park initiative to raise visibility and encourage protection and continued use of rich historic and cultural heritage offerings within the state.

Thank you very much for your consideration and the opportunity to present testimony on this issue today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.